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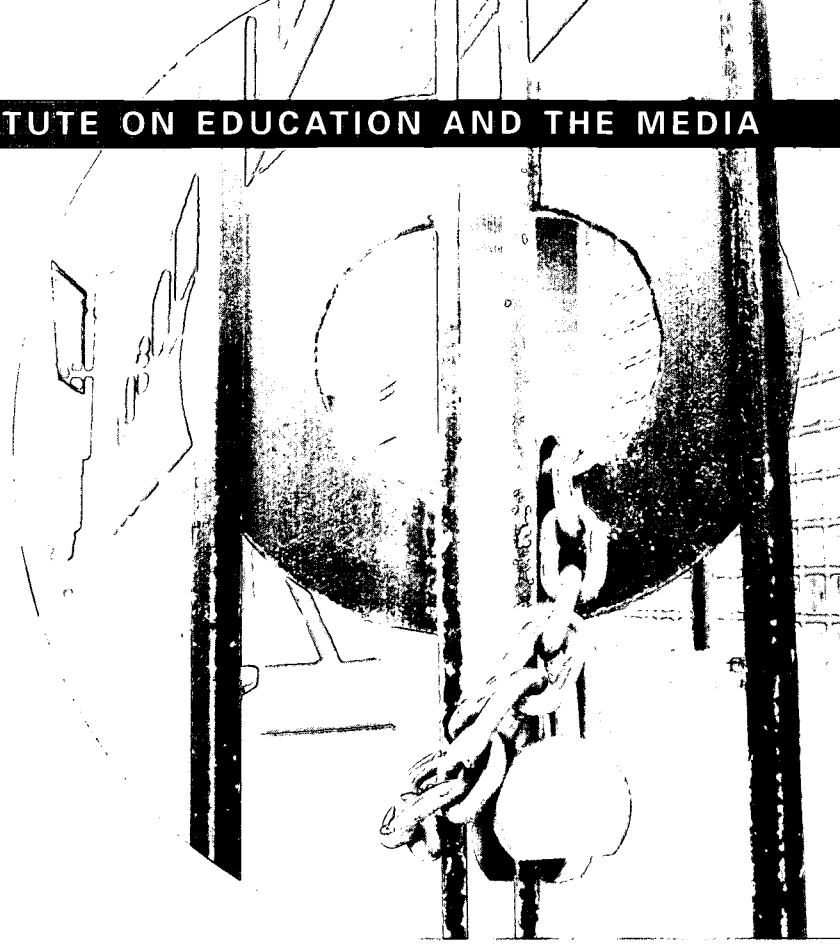
ABSTRACT

This report based on "Seminar on Reporting from the Elementary School Classroom" begins with a session on the controversies surrounding issues of access and the public's right to know. The panelists were a school superintendent, a teacher, a former school board member, and a school district public affairs officer. The seminar audience was comprised of approximately 30 education reporters. Two words mentioned frequently during the discussion were "trust" and "balance." Educators feel journalists need to gain their trust; journalists talk about the need to build trusting relationships with educators in order to get access. Both sides pay homage to the need for balance in reporting, but they may not agree on whether or not it has been achieved in any particular story. But, should journalists, by necessity, have to build a trust relationship with education in order to get their stories? And, are education officials, particularly those in the public affairs offices of school systems, obligated to help reporters in the pursuit of their stories, providing whatever access is needed? In the end, journalists must contend with as many policies on access as there are school districts simply because virtually every jurisdiction is on its own in deciding when to extend access to reporters. (DFR)

HECHINGER INSTITUTE ON EDUCATION AND THE MEDIA



A Journalist's Primer on Access to Schools

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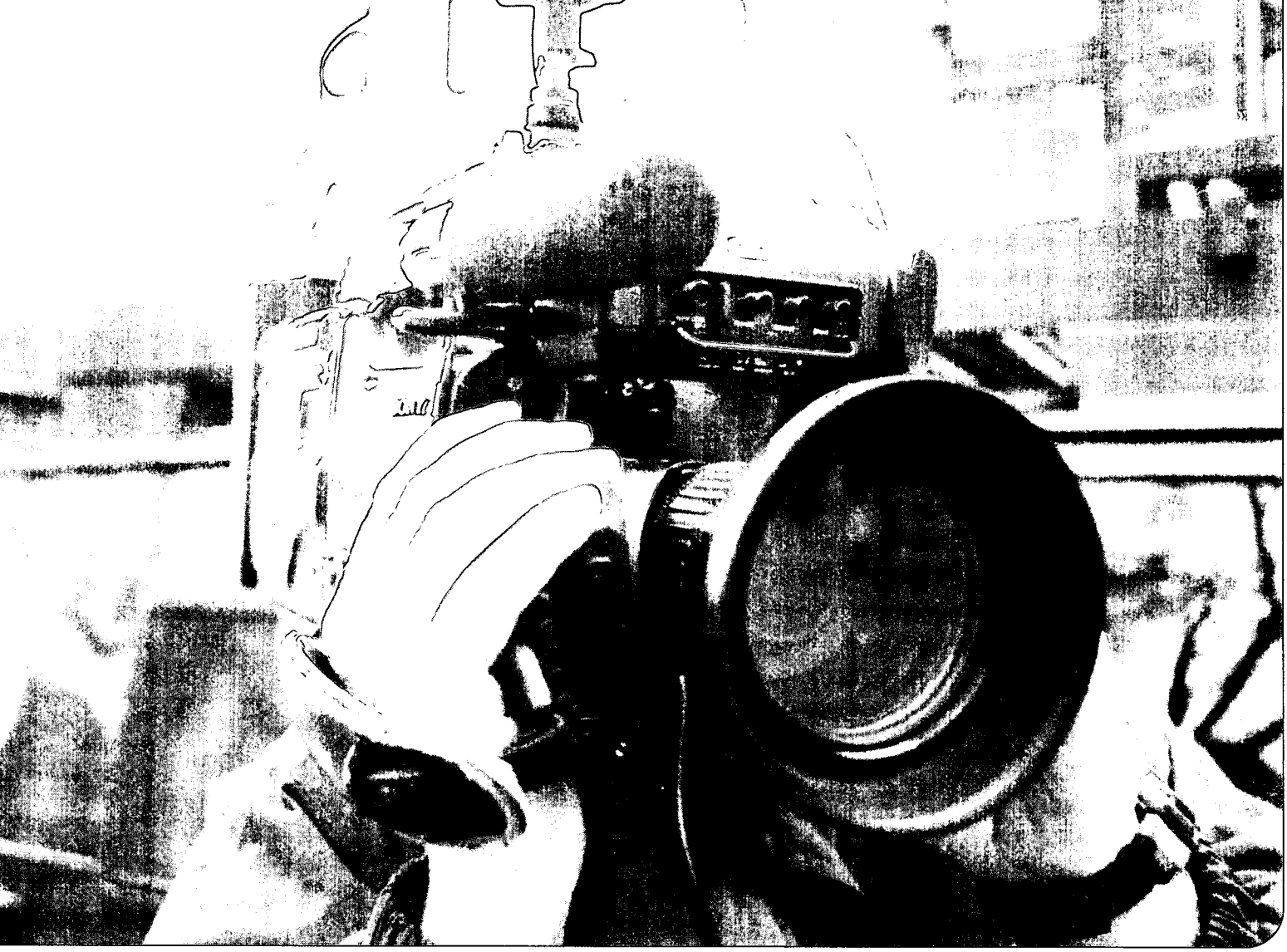


Journalists grouse about the difficulties they encounter in trying to obtain information on schools. They grow especially irritated over the obstacles put in their paths when they attempt to get into schools and classrooms. Educators, in turn, voice complaints about abuses by journalists in reporting on education. For their part, the educators are particularly annoyed by reporters who conduct themselves in ways that the educators feel exceed the boundaries of decorum and good taste. There is, at best, a mutual distrust, and, at worst, outright hostility between the two camps.

Thus, when the Hechinger Institute offered a Seminar on Reporting from the Elementary School Classroom it seemed natural to begin with a session on the controversies surrounding issues of access. The panelists—in a session held at the Freedom Forum's Newseum/NY—were a school district superintendent, a teacher, a former school board member, and a school district public affairs officer. There were no journalists on the panel, but such inclusion seemed unnecessary given the fact that the seminar audience comprised some 30 education reporters, many of them grizzled veterans of the beat.

Two words mentioned frequently during the discussion were "trust" and "balance." Educators speak of the need for journalists to gain their trust; journalists talk about the need to build trusting relationships with educators in order to get access. Both sides pay homage to the need for balance in reporting, but they may not agree on whether or not it has been achieved in any particular story.

Panelist Ted Kesler, a New York city schoolteacher, described the relationship that was so carefully constructed by him and Jacques Steinberg of the *New York Times* to enable Steinberg to spend months in his classroom for a series that ran most of an entire schoolyear. This arrangement was clearly the result of patient and intricate negotiation and trust building, without which the series probably would never have been written. This series won the Fred M. Hechinger Grand Prize for Distinguished Education Reporting from the Education Writers Association in 1998.

But should journalists, by necessity, have to build a trust relationship with educators in order to get their stories? And, are education officials, particularly those in the public affairs offices of school systems, obligated to help reporters in the pursuit of their stories, providing whatever access is needed?

Roger Jones, who performed this gate-keeping function as a public affairs consultant for the Newark (N.J.) Public Schools, said, "We don't always have to be the facilitator for the reporter...you want easy access; and you want certain things to happen almost instantly. That's not our role. Our role is to help you... but not get everything all in order in a nice package for you so that you can step into the box and pull the story together."

Scott Stephens of the (Cleveland) *Plain Dealer* had a different view on this. He said: "If I, as a reporter (print or electronic) request information or access to which I am entitled, it is incumbent on the tax-supported custodian of that information to produce it in a timely fashion. It really doesn't matter whether they think the reporter is 'fair' or 'responsible'—you don't have to like me and you don't have to like my stories; you just have to comply with my request in a timely fashion."

Part of the problem of access surely revolves around the differences between issues and incidents, something that was mentioned several times during the discussion. Issues—how reading gets taught or the uses of hands-on science, for instance—generally receive a less-rushed nurturing in the hands of reporters who, like Steinberg, may use repeated visits to a school to gather the threads from which they will weave their story. But just let an incident occur—a shooting, a drug bust, an attack on a teacher—and reporters are in a hurry and educators are wary about giving them access.

An additional overlay of potential conflict is brought into play when television reporters appear on the scene, cameras at the ready. Judith Conk, a school superintendent, said there is "a big difference" between broadcast and print journalists. Can it be that some of the excesses of television journalists make access more difficult for print journalists? Educators talk about "getting burned" and their reluctance to open the doors to other journalists after these negative experiences.

Yet, even requests for access to pursue seemingly benign stories may get stifled by the educational bureaucracy. Robert Sanchez, writing in the *Miami Herald*, told of reporters being turned down when they asked for access to people and information that would have enabled them to do stories about such developments as an inner-city teacher buying her own school supplies, middle school students studying an innovative way of curbing violence, and a 10-year-old whose filmmaking skills won him national acclaim. The Miami-Dade school board lawyer, defending this policy, spoke of the need to protect students' privacy.

Those who want access to schools and classrooms, in effect, seek to intrude on what many people consider sacred ground, places where parents expect their children to be protected. Requirements for releases and permissions slips from home are designed to guard the privacy of children and families. But such requirements, in the hands of school officials who are uncomfortable with public disclosure, can be twisted into weapons that ward off attempts to promote the public's right to know.

In the end, journalists must contend with as many policies on access as there are school districts simply because virtually every jurisdiction is on its own in deciding when to extend access to reporters. Further confounding journalists is the possibility that each school within a given district may fashion its own policy on access.

Ultimately, the quality of coverage is at stake when journalists are kept out of schools and classrooms. "...without access and a first-hand perspective on a school issue, any reporter covering education doesn't have much of a story," said Becky Waldrop of the *Corvallis* (Oregon) *Gazette-Times*. Questions of access for those reporting on education can hardly be separated from First Amendment issues generally. The first item of the Bill of Rights guarantees freedom of the press. Ideally, the schools would throw themselves open to the media and the media would exercise this freedom responsibly.

The Hechinger Institute intends that this publication—by airing a cross-section of views—will help in the pursuit of this ideal by advancing dialogue between the press and educators. We expect that with greater understanding on both sides will come a situation in which the press more readily gains the access it needs to do its job properly and educators have fuller appreciation for the public's right to know.

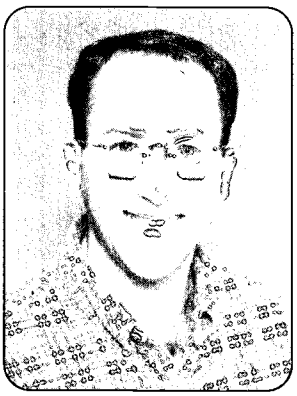
—Gene I. Maeroff, Director, Hechinger Institute

Presenters

Judith Conk

Judith Conk has taught and administered at all levels of education, from preschool to graduate school, in a career that spans more than 30 years. She has worked extensively with schools in the area of curriculum development and has served on state and national panels in aligning standards with classroom practice. She has authored two books that served as a companion for a beginning reading series of books. She was awarded the Distinguished Service Award for Educational Leadership from the New Jersey Association of School Administrators. She is the superintendent of the Glen Ridge (NJ) Public Schools.

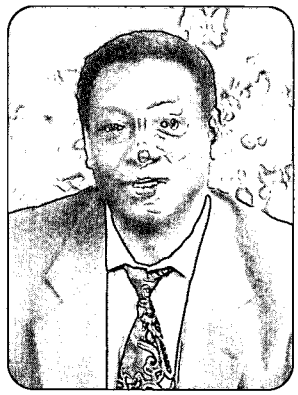
Ted Kesler



Ted Kesler teaches third grade at the Special Music School of America, a public school in District 3, Manhattan. Previously, he taught for 10 years at Public School 75. In 1998, he was one of five recipients of the Bank Street College Early Childhood Teacher of the Year Award. In addition to teaching children, he presents numerous workshops for teachers in New York City. He is a member of the think tank at The Reading & Writing Project at Teachers College.

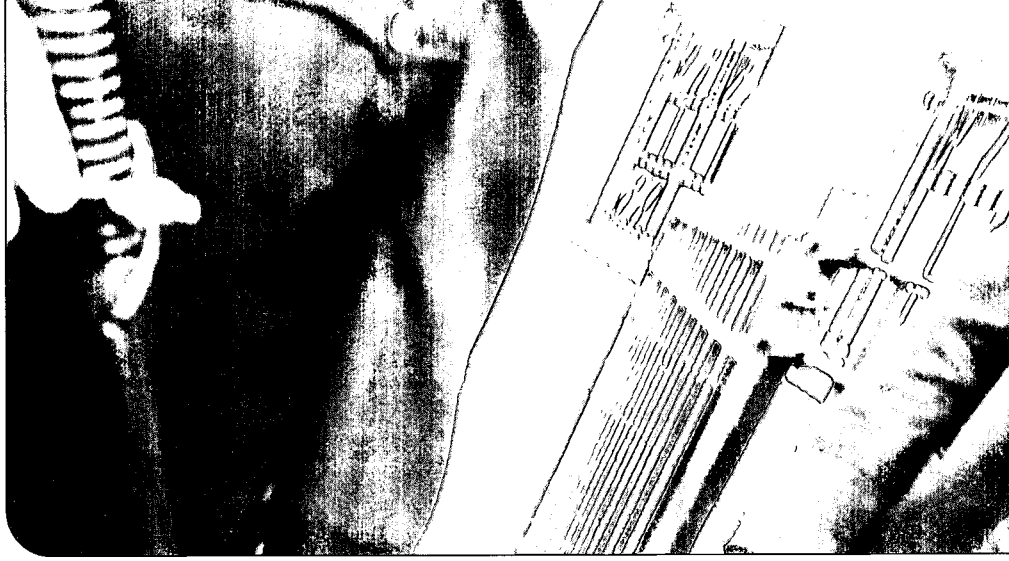
Roger Jones

Roger Jones, president/ CEO of Jones and Associates, was a public affairs consultant for the Newark (NJ) Public Schools.



Judith E. Moore

Judith E. Moore is a social worker with a private psychotherapy practice, and the mother of two daughters who attend public schools. For six years, she was a member of Community School Board Three, which serves the upper West Side of Manhattan and southern Harlem. She is a founding member of SBEAC, an organization of progressive school board members from across New York City.



Q. What are some of your over all views about the issue of access for journalists?

Jones: What I generally tell journalists when I start to work with them is that I'm going to broker on their behalf for access, and that I need for them to clarify what it is they're looking for. I don't want them to define what their whole process is, but rather what it is exactly that they are pursuing.

In our client's particular case, we have 82 schools. We're the largest school system in the State of New Jersey. When reporters give me some background on what they're pursuing, then I'll have an idea on what types of things I can do to accommodate them. I feel I'm a facilitator.

Probably, what interferes is when reporters talk to a principal of the school and say that they want to open that school up to the public, whether it's via television, radio or newspapers. Educators have concerns. Under state law, there are certain privacy rules. There are a whole bunch of other issues that oftimes reporters may not be aware of. And I find that very true with younger reporters.

The key to getting access is how a reporter develops a relationship, a level of understanding. That, in turn, allows me to convey that understanding to principals, or superintendents, and assistant superintendents.

Kesler: When the *New York Times* did a nine-part series about my classroom three years ago, Jack Steinberg from the *Times* spent an entire year, basically, in my class. That was based on a lot of clarity about what his intentions were, building a relationship of trust. One of the issues that arose had to do with using the actual names of the students in the articles, and featuring those children in the stories.

Jack and I received letters and phone calls from around the country during that series. The unfavorable comments usually had to do with protecting the privacy of the students. "How could you breach their privacy?" they wanted to know. And, of course, a lot of the readers didn't know the context behind it, that we spoke with the families involved, that Jack laid out what the series would be to that community.

We said, "If you do not want to participate, just sign that you don't want it." We never used those kids' names or included those kids in any of the photographs. So, all the families were very clear about what we were doing and our intentions. It was never hard for those families. It was hard for some of the readers but not for the families themselves. From the beginning, Jack and I were very clear about what we wanted to convey.

Conk: I guess, as a school superintendent, I see it as kind of a yin-yang. There are loads of times where my principals are begging for the newspapers to come in and report what's going on. But those are often not the times I get the phone call from a reporter who says, "I'll be right over." When I do, it's not the events that we want to publicize. I don't have the luxury, nor have I ever had the luxury, of having a public relations person or someone to be the facilitator. That's been my job, along with one or two others.

Usually what happens is, when an issue occurs, I'm right in the center of trying to manage the issue within the district. The reporter calls and one of two things happens. Either I am sitting by the phone because it's kind of mission control, and say, "Yes, I'll take that call," or I'm not, and my secretary says, "Well, she's out here dealing with it, she'll get back to you." Sometimes that's interpreted as, I'm hiding

A Reporter's Perspective

The main issue is overcoming the fundamental belief of many bureaucrats that information belongs to them, not the public. During November's panel discussion, I heard a lot of talk about records custodians preferring to deal with reporters they "trusted" or with whom they had "relationships"

That all sounds fine, but it really misses the point: If I, as a reporter (print or electronic) request information or access to which I am entitled, it is incumbent on the taxpayer-supported custodian of that information to produce it in a timely fashion. It really doesn't matter whether they think the reporter is "fair" or "responsible"—you don't have to like me and you don't have to like my stories; you just have to comply with my request in a timely fashion.

Obviously, reporters should be professional and courteous, but I have little patience for a public information officer who collects his or her paycheck from the public trough who tells me he's too busy to comply with a legitimate records request. The stifling of the flow of information out of schools is a thousand times more onerous than other alleged roadblocks to education reform, such as teachers contracts.

If veteran education reporters, many of them sophisticated in public records laws and with a newspaper's law firm in back of them, cannot get information, what chance does the average parent or community activist have?

Scott Stephens—(Cleveland) *Plain Dealer*

Cecilia Balli—*San Antonio Express-News*

somewhere and not willing to do that. I think that the conflict is in the challenge— clarity, timeliness, legalities, but most of all just the stress of a situation.

We recently had a young child in the community who was killed, accidentally. A tree fell on the car. It was not a child in the school but the brother was a kindergartener (in the school). It was on the news before the grandmother knew about it. So, we, as the school system, had to deal with a hysterical grandmother, hysterical parents, and hysterical kindergartners. I had five reporters at my door wanting my attention. And I think that's sometimes where the conflicts are.

Moore: The issue is really trust. This is the most important factor, at least coming from New York. There is a feeling that the public schools are on the defensive. There's a fear that it (reporting) will be sensationalized. The schools have to prove that they're doing a good job. If things are going wrong, the schools will be blamed again and again for not being able to meet some standard for which, in my opinion, they're never given enough resources to achieve in the first place.

It takes a long time to develop a relationship with a reporter. If they call spontaneously, you have to know what kinds of things the reporter's done in the past, how they've covered certain things, how knowledgeable they seem to be about the context that the story's occurring in, and whether you can really talk to them openly, or how careful you have to be.

Jones: There is a term called "edu-speak." When I start dealing with reporters about education in different contexts—whether it's test scores, or whether it's facilities, management plans, a whole host of things—there is a gap. What happens is that you find yourself over and over trying to help them understand the context in which things happen. It's very different than what happens out there in the other parts of the world, outside of the educational component. It is a different world when you step into the arena of education.

I have not spent my whole life in education; I am in the business sector. So when I stepped into educaton, it took me a little while to get the grasp of it. Time is of the essence when you start to explain (something) to a reporter who's looking for a story, who's on a deadline, who has so many lines per page, who has so much time per video or TV or radio segment. To get involved with those subtleties becomes very tough.

I go back and start relating to an educator why XYZ did not appear in a certain story—it was simply because the reporter did not understand the context of how important those little subtleties were. But what the reporter didn't mention in the article—let's say it was a drug-related incident that happened in a school, and you have a substance abuse counselor on the scene—sets up a whole set of other dynamics for us in terms of how the public that we serve will react.

At times, I've had to literally walk reporters through certain things, depending on the topic. Whether it's the budget, whether it's test scores, whether it's a facility maintenance plan.

Conk: One thing we do in our schools, and I've done this before in other districts, is to begin the year by talking to parents about media coverage. We don't wait for the issue to arise. And we say that we want that permission slip on file so we know it's the responsibility of the principal or the classroom teacher to know which students can or can't (be quoted by name or appear in photos). Again, it's always the context. When we're doing that great thing, when we're recognizing students who

A Reporter's Perspective

Educators and journalists will forever have conflicting ideas about what the media's coverage of schools should be like. Given our very different interests and stakes, as well as damage done by reporters who came before us at some papers, that disagreement is understandable.

Our challenge, then, is not to try to sit down and expect to arrive at an all-encompassing, perfect agreement about how we will conduct our coverage, but rather to begin a dialogue and nurture relationships with individual school and school district leaders. An important first step is simply to get to know about each other's jobs and goals. On our part, we must convince educators that while our professional mandates are different, we have the same genuine interest about how our education system works.

In the San Antonio area, we attended a superintendent luncheon organized by the local Chamber of Commerce, and once the school administrators witnessed how much we actually know about what we're writing, they suggested meeting again to discuss at greater length the most serious educational issues they face. After that, only a long-term mending of past grievances, in the form of fair and sound coverage, may convince the educators we work with that we don't always have conspiracy theories.

Cecilia Balli—*San Antonio Express-News*

recently spoke in Washington for us, we want their pictures in the paper.

Then, there is the other time, when something negative has occurred, that drug bust, or that problem in the school. From my point of view, (it is important) to make sure that we've cleared permission ahead of time and are sensitive to the legal issues. That is part of our constraint. Sometimes I think we're not believed on that one.

Q? Judith Moore, did your school board ever get involved in the issues of photographs and names?

Moore: We never did. We had no policy about it.

Q? Just left it up to the individual teachers or principals?

Moore: Superintendents (in New York City's 32 community school districts) actually handle it differently with some trying to control what principals would say, or at least funneling what they say through the main office. But there was no school board policy about it.

Q? Do you think that school boards should have a policy on it?

Moore: I don't know. I remember when I started on the school board, I was chair of the school board, I was new and I really didn't know a lot about how to run a school board. I knew hardly anything about how the school system ran; I didn't know a lot about anything. I would get calls from the press, and I would just never return them. I wouldn't even consider returning them. I felt like I didn't really know enough, and I was really nervous about saying the wrong thing, saying something that would misrepresent the system. Then, as things went on, I became more willing (to talk) if I knew someone.

Usually, the call would come in through the school board operators; it would never come to me directly. So, if there was a message from somebody saying they just want to talk, I was very wary about returning a call because I didn't want to be taken by surprise. If it was about a particular subject that I felt knowledgeable about or if I wanted to get a message across about that subject, I'd return the call. Then, after a few years, I got to the point where I started calling the press because I wanted a story to be told.

Jennifer Brett—*Atlanta Journal Constitution*

Q? What about this question of cultivating relationships with individual reporters?

Jones: You've got to work at it. I think people begin to learn where your head happens to be in relation to certain situations. I mean I don't always agree with the reporter's position and I'm sure they don't always agree with my position. We've had incidents where we would argue with each other, vehemently. I've had situations that have taken place in the school system, alleged situations, and the reporters say to me they want to interview the student that was involved.

It's an alleged situation that becomes a matter for the authorities. Now, how do you make a story out of an alleged

A Reporter's Perspective

Our policy on bomb threats used to be that we just didn't report on them. We felt it would just encourage the practice. But then the Heritage High School shooting happened and for a while after that anything would really raise a red flag and we'd go racing. Since then, our policy has been back to what it was before; we try to assess on a case-by-case basis.

The other day, a parent called me and said that the high school that their kid attended had been evacuated because of a bomb threat. I thought, "Oh, geez, you know, this is probably not worth anything, but I'd better just call and see what happened." The vice principal that I talked to said, "Well, we had a fire drill; that's all it was. We have these from time to time. We had all kids line up and brought them back in; it was no big deal."

So, I thought, all right. But a few minutes later, I got hold of the police reporter who said that, indeed, there had been a bomb scare and that the police had been called to the school. They did the sweep. There was no bomb and in 15 minutes everybody was back in class. No big deal. And I thought, "Well, this is interesting. The police report says there was a bomb threat, the vice principal says it was a fire drill. I wonder what's going on."

In the interim, the vice principal called back and said, "You know what, I didn't quite tell you the truth a few minutes ago, and I feel bad about that. We did have an incident; somebody came across a note, and we called the police. They came and did a bomb sweep. And we determined that this was not a story. Somebody was just trying to get cute, get out of a test, probably."

This is an example of how something relatively minor can be escalated by an attempt to de-emphasize a security issue that is really not a big deal. And that goes back to the issue of trust. This person and I had talked every week about different stories, and because we had that relationship, I guess he felt sort of bad about fibbing a little bit to me. The bottom line was, we didn't write anything.

My trust for him is probably enhanced now. He said to me, "My credibility's at issue with you. I want to be trusted when I come to you and say we have a nice story." It was important to him for me to be able to trust him. As a result, our working relationship is probably stronger than it had been before because I know he's shooting straight with me. And I know there are times when you can't reveal every possible detail of a story, but if you just shoot straight, a lot of times it doesn't turn out nearly as bad as you think it might. And in this case, the end result is, somebody's trying to get cute and get out of a test. I don't think that needs to be in the paper.

Jennifer Brett—*Atlanta Journal Constitution*

A Reporter's Perspective

Many school officials are so suspicious of the media's motives that they refuse to provide even basic information that clearly is public. One recent example is enrollment figures; it took me three weeks to get the district to supply the district's enrollment totals for the past 10 years. Another example: Cincinnati Public Schools is seeking two tax levies totaling $104 million this spring; last year they cut more than $20 million from their budget because of tight finances.

To show readers what constraints the district has to deal with, I wanted to write about how cities give millions away in tax abatements to lure businesses, and how that hurts school districts—especially in a state like Ohio that relies on property taxes to fund schools. District officials worried that I intended to blame them for abating taxes (even though city council wields most abatement powers) and haven't cooperated with me.

Another example: I recently was trying to get updated data on various performance indicators (dropout rates, student and staff absentee rates, proficiency scores, etc) by school (the district has 77 schools), and was told by one flack that she couldn't give me the information I sought because it was "in the basement." After warning her that I would call our attorneys, she got it that day. On another instance, the same flack told me she couldn't get me information because the employee who tracked it had cancer. I think district officials have been burned in the past. Some of that heat has been warranted, and some, unwarranted. Many of my district's leaders are unabashedly reluctant to be accountable and don't view the public as their bosses. Before the school board decided to seek $104 million in taxes on the March 7 ballot, they admitted—in a public meeting—that they didn't want to publicly discuss what amount to seek in a levy nor what the ramifications were if it didn't pass. Their reasoning: They didn't want to public to panic if the school board should discuss really big tax increases, and they didn't want to "threaten" voters with consequences and suffer the backlash of "no" votes.

So, they directed administrators to huddle on it, polled each other by telephone and didn't discuss the levy amounts until they rubber-stamped it at a hastily scheduled public meeting. The result: The public had no say in how much the district should seek, nor any insights into how they came to the $104 million they agreed to. And that furthers the perception, which they say they'd like to shake, that they like to do business behind closed doors. They manifest their hostility by refusing to get on the telephone or refusing to answer questions. Cincinnati Public's superintendent, who started in August 1998, won't get on the telephone unless the topic is a pet project for him ... or unless there is so much media attention that he feels bullied into calling a press conference.

My recommendations for bridging these problems would include the following steps. . .

Regular meetings with key sources (like breakfast once a week just to chat). Inviting key sources to your newsroom to give them insights into what you do has helped me in the past. Many school leaders feel that press attention can only hurt them; they simply are not convinced that it can help them (see my previous example on tax abatements; that would be an investigative explainer on money pressures districts deal with that many citizens don't think about). I'm not sure how to convince them that press coverage could be beneficial (without misleading them into thinking that we're their personal publicists)!

Dana DiFilippo—*Cincinnati Enquirer*

Dana DiFilippo—*Cincinatti Enquirer*

situation that may be nothing more than that? It may be zero by the time we're through. But the damage would be done to the family and to the student if I allow it to go to the level that some reporters may want it to go to because they need an exciting teaser for the six o'clock news or for a small item for the newspaper.

So, I think that developing that relationship is very key. A level of trust begins to evolve between two people. In my case, I deal with a lot of reporters from the New York and New Jersey area; I get a lot of the TV channels coming to me. With 82 schools, anything can happen during the course of a week.

Q? Ted, you mentioned the policy that you and Jack Steinberg had worked up regarding ground rules at the outset of his work on the series. Are you satisfied, or do you think maybe it should have been a little different?

Kesler: I think that the series never would have occurred if we didn't establish (ground rules) from the beginning. If we were unable—if any person in a higher position, the principal, or the superintendent had blocked that—then he (Steinberg) would have pulled out from doing that series, or the metro editor would have pulled out from doing that series. I think it was contingent on the fact that he could delve into the lives of the teacher and the teacher's students.

That was a case where it was essential to use their names and have that kind of information about them. The series occurred because of the relationship Jack Steinberg had established with the district superintendent. The district superintendent already knew so much about Jack Steinberg and the kind of writing he did and the reporting he did in our district that he already had a great basis for (allowing him) to pursue that series. The relationship that the reporters establish from the beginning is key.

Q? What responsibility do you think journalists have to the school system and to the public when they're reporting on schools?

Jones: One basic premise: Balance. That's all I ever ask of a reporter, balance. Don't deliver me stories over and over that have one perspective and are very heavy-ended on one side because it's virtually impossible for anything to always come across (fairly to the public) that way.

Conk: We're a very small town, Glen Ridge, and we have two weekly papers. The school system is the only thing to report on in the entire town. I deal with the Newark *Star-Ledger* and the *New York Times*, as well, and I'm looking for news reporting, rather than editorializing in the articles. That's the challenge and it's harder and harder to get that.

I'm just asking for events to be reported without the reporters'

opinion coming across in a news article. If it's in a feature, if it's in an editorial, that's different. But report the facts, report what happened because our people are reading it, and they believe what you write.

Kesler: What irks me in reporting of the school system is the incredible focus on standardized tests and test scores and how that's somehow supposed to be the pinnacle of learning. There are so many other gauges that I use to monitor the growth of my students, really concrete ways that are never told about by the media.

Jones: The tough situation is that these are taxpayers' dollars that are being utilized. Everybody wants to see a return on that dollar. That's understandable. So, I'm always faced with that when I deal with a reporter. We've gone through it over and over—that whole premise of taxpayers' dollars and the need to open up that door and put the spending under a magnifying glass.

No one really cares about education until you put a real dollar value on it. The more you kept putting a dollar value on it, the more the district keeps being put under that magnifying glass. I suspect it's going to be under this magnifying glass for the next 10 years or more because there are tremendous changes that schools are going through.

A Reporter's Perspective

A primary problem in access to information about schools is the convoluted, burdomsome form that information takes. It is neither easily accessible nor understandable. National and state government regulatory agencies on top of the local bureaucracy guarantee that the most useful information will be buried deep within thick reports.

School officials often have legitimate reasons to fear the press. All of them have seen other officials tracked down and humiliated by the media,often on television. The press does not have a reputation as a warm, caring institution. Because of that, trust is built by individuals. Each reporter must earn his or her own reputation. Part of that is continuing to learn and understand the forces—political, social and historic—that are dramatically played out in education.

In addition, a growing knowledge base and continued education is vital for reporters to be respected by those they cover. A legitimate complaint of educators is that news organizations often assign new reporters to education, then quickly rotate them to other beats. That does not encourage either reporting excellence or access. The more a reporter understands the issue and is able to give it perspective, the greater the comfort level of educators will be.

It is scary to deal with someone you know does not fully understand a subject, so you are not likely to be as candid or forthcoming with information that could be misinterpreted. At the same time, the institution of education does not embrace change. Those at the top— superintendents and their cabinets— love to please their school boards with happy, positive news. Sometimes they believe they can control that and encourage positive stories. Not admitting their challenges and showing recognition of their failings makes the press suspicious in turn.

The more both sides know and understand about their subject and the responsibilites of the other,the better lines of communication will be. That is just the beginning to serving the needs of readers.

Marilyn Brown—*Tampa Tribune*

Marilyn Brown—*Tampa Tribune*

Stories are going to be written about test scores and stories are going to be written about the amount of money per student and the amount of dollars that go into training, and things of that nature, but I don't see stories written about how you get there, what is it that you're trying to do to make a difference—whether you're doing it right or whether you're doing it wrong. You know, it's a very quick fix for getting a great story when reporters can go immediately to what's wrong.

Conk: Many of the states now are dealing with state assessments and new types of testing. We're having enough trouble trying to understand it ourselves. The challenge for all of us is to come to a common understanding (of the meaning of test results)in reporting on progress in schools.

Q? Is it incumbent on the schools, then, to present to the media and to the public some kind of information that gives them an idea of whether there has or has not been progress? We talked about standardized tests not being that good a measure. If journalists want to be able to show whether there has or has not been progress, and the schools aren't putting out measures other than the test scores to determine this then what are the journalists to do?

Jones: I find myself reading constantly about whole school reform. I'm reading about the reorganization the school system's been going through, separate budgets running parallel with other budgets, I mean, it's a business now. It's no longer just looking at education where it's a little red school house and the teacher walks through the door every day, and you go through your ABC's. It's much more complicated now. It's states competing with states to do better. Because people are looking for greater performance for their dollar now.

Moore: I think that what schools can do to present themselves is to

put this data into a context, but I think putting it into a context is a long sentence. It's a paragraph, at least, and a lot of the news stories seem to be two or three words that want to be taken out of the article.

One concept that we used to talk about a lot in our district is value-added. A school may not look very good compared to other schools, but compared to where it started (there may be) tremendous progress. It's related to a lot of different indicators, not simply standardized tests. For example, how many kids came from the lowest quartile to the next quartile or whatever? It's complicated and maybe not all that interesting to put it into an article, but context for me is one of the things that leads to balance. This is the responsibility, ideally, of the journalists.

Q? How much of the dissatisfaction with the way that the media treat the schools has to do not so much with print journalists, but with TV? Is there a difference?

Conk: A big difference. Television journalists want an answer and they want an answer now. I found that it's very hard to develop the kind of relationship (with a TV journalist) that you can develop with a print reporter. The understanding is not there. And the person is there with the camera and the microphone in the midst of the mix of craziness that's going on. At least we have an opportunity to develop that relationship with the print reporter.

Jones: I deal with TV reporters a lot and it's tough. They're tougher, more seasoned. They know what they're coming for. They don't like to waste a lot of time. Generally, I get the TV reporters when there's a hard-hitting story. They are very good at what they do. It's the only profession where you can take your show, edit it, remix it, and then air it within minutes. You have the total package, just like that. You can rerun it on the six o'clock news; you can come back and rerun it on the ten o'clock news; you can pick it up—if you stay on late enough—to run it at three in the morning; and you can pick it up at six o'clock in the morning. And it's still the same story. Then, they come back (the next day), shoot outside the building, dub in a few more things, and rerun it all over again.

Conk: And you can rerun it six months from now, when that issue comes up again. I mean, I'm famous for that one incident that we keep revisiting year after year after year.

Jones: They come with a great deal of passion for what they're looking to do. It becomes an area of negotiating. I know they're on a time clock so that's something that I utilize in my favor. I know they're going to have things that they utilize in their favor. I think it's something that we understand very well. In that short amount of time, whatever that time is—and only they know it—we try to cooperate with each other. We try to make sure that both of us get something out of it. That's what it comes down to. Once it's done, there's no taking it back and reshaping it. That's it.

Moore: There is a difference between incidents and issues: the ways they are reported are very different. I'm much more wary about talking to people about incidents than I am about issues because the issues are an ongoing thing that you probably will have another chance to elaborate on, whereas the incidents are scary. With television, you don't know very much about what happened if something went wrong in a school on a given day. Someone calls up. "What happened?" You don't really know unless you were right on the scene, and as a school board member I was rarely right on that scene.

A Reporter's Perspective

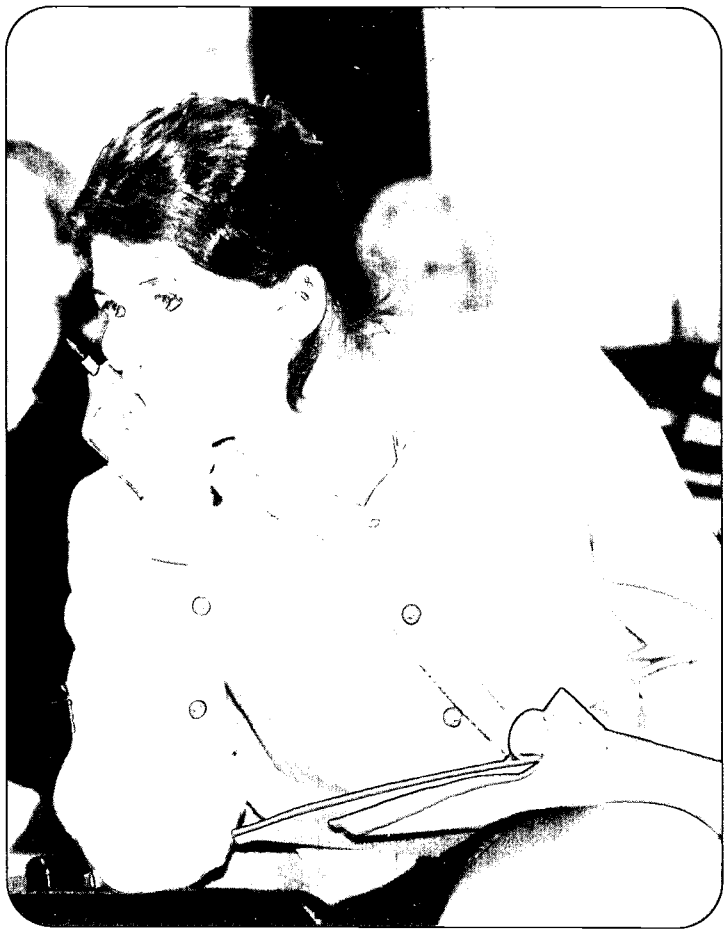
Reporters need access to sources to accurately report stories. Some districts place hurdles in front of reporters and make them jump through numerous public relations hoops. That generally hasn't been my experience. Most of my problems involve hesitant sources. Some sources are just uncomfortable talking to the media and need some convincing. Others feel they have been treated unfairly in the past—often by the broadcast media.

Building trust is important regardless of the beat. Reporters have to prove they are fair and accurate and build a pool of sources. Trust is gained by little things like introducing yourself to principals and superintendents before a story breaks. Sometimes building trust is just a matter of calling a source back before a sensitive story runs and telling them what to expect.

When I began increasing my coverage of school security, I went to the security director's office and wrote a story about a drug-sniffing dog the office had recently acquired. He loves the dog and keeps him at home at night. He told me at the time that it took time for trust to develop and he would watch the stories I wrote to make sure they were accurate. The drug sniffing dog story wasn't all that hard-hitting, but the next time a big story did break, he was much more cooperative.

If a source is being difficult, I try to remain calm and friendly. The worst way to ruin your chances of getting a story is to get angry and become rude. Second, I try to reason with them about the benefit they receive from helping me. If a source absolutely won't talk, sometimes its worth looking for another source.

Heather Hollingsworth—*Topeka Capital-Journal*



Heather Hollingsworth—*Topeka Capital-Journal*

It was the principal, or the teacher, or somebody else who was on the scene. I would be very cautious about wanting to talk about the incident because I wouldn't want to get it wrong. I wouldn't want to blame someone or miss something. Issues are a whole other kettle of fish. The relationship that I developed with a reporter was with someone who was interested in the long-term issues.

Carmen Lee—*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Kesler: As far as recognizing the growth of students throughout the year is concerned, the whole basis for those articles that occurred for my class was a statement by (City Schools Chancellor) Rudy Crew that all third graders will be reading on grade level by the end of the year. If the media just focused on that, just on that statement, that either you're reading on grade level by the end of the year or you're not, then you could have called what occurred in my classroom a failure. Not everybody in my class attained that goal.

But what I find with the print media is that, a lot more consistently than in TV, they slow things down, just the simple fact that it's in writing. They can delve into it more. It was by delving into it that Jack was able to reveal the steps of growth that every student took towards (the Chancellor's) goal. There's a progression, and some of the progression (can be reported on). In that sense, my year with those kids was very successful.

Q? What if Jack Steinberg, the reporter, had not been from the New York Times. What if had proposed doing the very same thing, but he had been from WCBS, WNBC, or WABC? What would have been your reaction, and the reactions of the principal and the superintendent?

Kesler: First of all, whenever there are cameras and microphones, it is almost inevitable that the behavior of the children changes. You can say, "Just ignore the video tape," but I find that when the children are normally talking to me or each other, they're all looking wherever the camera is. It all depends so much on the trust and the relationship that we establish with the reporter at the beginning.

Conk: There's a negotiation process that goes on with print reporters because of the time and the clarification that can go on. But once you're dealing with that camera, it's much more unpredictable. You could be interviewed—and this has happened to colleagues—and the reporter is standing there. The camera's on the superintendent, and behind you walks a high school child who may choose to wave to his friends in an impolite way, and that's recorded and used. That happened in my district and it exacerbated a very tough situation before I got there. It's that kind of thing that makes us a little bit more wary because it's less controllable.

Jones: The media ask educators to wear a whole lot of different hats, which they wouldn't ask the CEO of a corporation or the head of a small business to wear, particularly when certain things have happened. A classic example is where there's an incident at the school,

A Reporter's Perspective

In Pittsburgh, we're trying to dig out some information about superintendent candidates, but the school board wants to keep the names secret until a final selection is made. In this case, and I believe in many others, the barrier is the belief of school officials that the public doesn't have a need or right to know information until they are ready to release it. And there is no state or federal law requiring them to do otherwise.

Because of what I'm dealing with currently, I think school officials just want to control as much information as possible and don't see any reason for the public to know much beyond how hard teachers and administrators are working to educate children. There's a belief that the local residents should trust the judgment of school board members whom they elected as their representatives and of administrators who are the educated professionals.

As a result, it sometimes takes some type of scandal to prove that more public scrutiny is needed before school officials will consider granting more access.

Other problems involving access can be traced to perceptions of the media based on factors such as bad experiences with reporters in the past, the belief that the media is only interested in bad news or— the age-old problem for print reporters—the evaluation of all media by the intrusiveness of television reporting.

Unfortunately, such perceptions are not always unjustified. Some reporters burn sources, making it difficult for those who follow them on the beat. Sometimes, the school shooting is the story that makes the front page while a story that's really about education is buried inside. And television, by its very nature, can be intrusive and can capture the sensational of any story, good or bad.

The combination of the desire to control information and a poor perception of the media can lead to those phone calls from reporters that are never returned or the delay in releasing information that should be public. Then there are the curt responses to questions, if they answered at all.

As for bridging these problems, I don't know if there is any type of permanent solution because new board members are elected and new administrators are hired, requiring the cycle of building relationships and trust to start over again. At the *Post-Gazette*, our editorial board sets up meetings with superintendents and school board presidents at least once a year to get a sense of the direction of the district.

In the past, I've participated in meetings with principals and school security staff to discuss their concerns and complaints about coverage. The newspaper also has co-sponsored forums for school board candidates during election campaign season. I think all of these efforts help in promoting the idea that the newspaper and the schools are part of the same community and try to serve that community.

As school officials get more comfortable with the people behind the notepads, cameras and editorial pages, I believe they become more open and accessible and more willing to give access—until the next crisis that they would rather we ignore.

Carmen Lee—*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

A Reporter's Perspective

The hardest schools to gain access to are, ironically, charter schools, which often see themselves as private and not subject to Florida's open records and meetings law, even though they are doing the public's business and subject to those laws. And of course private schools, which I cover, don't have to tell much about themselves. This is becoming an issue now that Florida has a voucher law that allows public school students to take public money to private schools.

Many educators and parents tell me they have been burned by reporters in the past, who (they say) were pushing an agenda, or got facts wrong, or misunderstood or oversimplified complex issues, or misquoted them. Whether this is true or just their take on what happened, I have to contend with it on a daily basis. They sometimes just say that we are "out to get them."

I spend a lot of what i call community time, explaining why I am working on a story and what I am trying to accomplish. In extreme cases, I even give them "references," other educators who have found me to be fair even in sensitive stories. I believe that many people are so misinformed about the press that they feel any contact with a reporter will be a negative one.

I recently had to cover the story of a Catholic high school principal (not a priest) who was caught in a car with a 16-year-old youth. Because I had already established a relationship with the principal's boss at the archdiocese, the boss was willing to talk to me about the matter. Based on that relationship he told me that he felt I would be fair to the school no matter what I wrote.

Lona O'Connor—(Florida) *Sun-Sentinel*

but the superintendent is not at the school. The superintendent was at the main education office, but the reporter might want the superintendent's reaction. You need the impact. I understand all that. (The public information officer) is there to take care of responding to the media, to make sure that the points are gotten across very clearly.

The superintendent doesn't need to come out for the bomb scare. The principal of the school will send a letter home and will reassure parents, and the district's spokesman will come out and reassure you (the media) that it's fine. You can talk to the police. But all of a sudden, you know, when it's television, the helicopters are flying over, and the alert is going up. There are graphics on the screen.

We had a case like that recently. There was an incident at one of our schools. I arrive at the school and there's a helicopter over the building. There are reporters from 7 and 9 and 11 and 2 and 4 and 5 and 41 and 12 and NJN. They're trying to figure out what's going on and they want to get in the school. I can't let 10 different TV channels run into a school building with cameras and reporters. To go to what? A classroom so they can sort of get a sense that there was allegedly a student in a room with a gun or an alleged gun? But they just want to get into the classroom. All 12 TV channels. It was ridiculous.

Moore: I was just thinking, in terms of news, about how public schools are on the defensive. This isn't true in small towns where there aren't a lot of private schools. But in New York City, bomb scares or violent incidents, when they happen in private schools, are tragedies. When they happen in public schools, they're just what happens in public schools—that's what people expect to happen in public schools. And that's one of the things I think is an obstacle for people within the public schools, in terms of giving access to reporters.

Another interesting factor has to do with whether the reporter has a child in public school. The public schools, at least in urban settings, are for "other people's children." They're not for a lot of the people who are maybe doing the reporting, and they're not for a lot of readers of some of the papers that they're being reported in.

Kesler: When I speak to people from outside New York City and I tell them I'm a New York City public school teacher, the first thing they say is, "Aren't you afraid of being shot?" That's kind of indicative of the messages they're receiving from various media.

Q? Would you say that, in this matter of incidents versus issues, which has come up a few times, that when there's an incident print journalists pretty much behave the same as TV journalists? After all, everybody's dealing with an ephemeral situation.

(**All say**, "Absolutely.")

Kesler: I read an article recently that would give you the impression that youth violence in this country is worse now than it has ever been. In actuality, the statistics all bear out that youth violence is less now. It's safer now for teenagers than it has ever been across the country. There is less violence among teenagers.

Conk: But I think the interesting point is that those incidents are occurring now in suburban schools, which, you know, never had this. Now, all of a sudden, it's newsworthy because it would never be expected that anybody would have a gun or a knife in a suburban school. Our youth have a lot of challenges no matter where they're living nowadays. And it's interesting to see the way the news is being reported on the many tragedies that have occurred in suburban school systems.

Jones: That's true. When you hear the words "Newark, New Jersey," immediately fear comes to the minds of a lot of people. I've been working with the district for a little over a year now. I did an assessment of stories done in the past, and I went back and started talking to reporters. I said, "Do you realize that 75% of our student population is K through 8? Seventy-five percent. We have no metal

Lona O'Connor—(Florida) *Sun-Senitnel*

detectors in our K through 8 schools. We don't have any video cameras in our schools. We have an extremely low incident rate in our K through 8 schools, and that represents 75% of our population."

No metal detectors, no armed police officers, no video cameras. We don't have muscle men patrolling the hallways or anything like that. When you get to our high schools, we don't have anything any different than the high schools in some of the suburban areas who finally have come to grips with the fact that they need the video cameras. And we're an urban district.

When I start on this path with a reporter and explain that to him, he says, "It can't be. There's no way that can be." We have a zero tolerance policy, and have had it for years. So, there are a lot of things that have been out there – this is not new stuff, but these are new things to other parts of our country. They're even considered very severe in other parts of our country. But we've been doing it for years.

Howard Libit—*Baltimore Sun*

Q? There was reference earlier to the disruptive effect of having TV cameras in the schools, in the classrooms. At the very least, a person who goes in as a print reporter is going to have at least a pad and pencil. Also, he or she represents an extra adult in the room, and somebody who isn't normally there. Is that disruptive at all?

Conk: I don't think that's as disruptive as a camera—at least in most elementary classrooms. There are a lot of adults in and out, whether it be a lot of different teachers who work with different aspects of the children, parent volunteers, community volunteers, intergenerational volunteers, supervisors who go in to do evaluations. So, when a reporter comes in, we euphemistically tell the little ones, "Oh, Mrs. So and so is here today to see how well you learn." They might be interested for a minute, and then they'll go about their business. As they get older, once the camera comes in all bets are off. You just can't control what the kids will do. That's their big thing, they think they're going to be on the six o'clock news.

Jones: I don't want it to sound like when we invite the media in that it should just be for good things. I mean, we have some serious problems in the urban schools, and the problems don't just center around students. The facilities are old, overcrowding exists in some areas, and there are certain things, that when the media decide that they're going to cover it, you just can't deny it. I wouldn't tell anyone that I work with that we should. But you want balance. We had a

A Reporter's Perspective

For education reporters looking to move beyond school board meetings and administrative trivia, access to schools, principals, teachers and students is the most critical factor in being able to produce insightful stories on the classroom.

I find that the biggest obstacle to access involves the type of access that schools are looking to offer. They have no problem inviting you in to cover their special events—carnivals, read-a-thons, fundraisers, etc.— but when it comes down to actually writing about what occurs in schools day after day, they start getting scared.

As a reporter trying to describe to parents what their children are learning and how they're being taught, I find that I need to be able to just sit in classrooms and watch. Sometimes, it's being able to sit in a second-grade pod of classrooms and float from one to the next for a morning. Other times, I need to come back and watch the same couple of math classes at a high school for two or three days in a row. That's the only way to truly see what is happening, and to have both the students and the teachers forget there's a reporter (and photographer) watching them.

But I find that in many schools, there's a great hesitation to leave a reporter unescorted. The principal, assistant principal or public information officer needs to be at their side, all of the time. That interferes with good, honest reporting by creating commotion. An experienced education reporter knows how to stay out of the way (and even knows that certain things can't fairly be put in the newspaper without parental permission, like the name of a special education child who may have problems controlling himself).

I also find that the problem of permission slips and using children's names creates obstacles. No two school districts seem to have the exact same policy, and even those systems that do have good policies don't always do an adequate job of communicating them to their schools.

The best policy seems to be one in which parents are notified at the start of the school year that their children, because they're attending public schools, may be photographed or interviewed by the news media. If the parents have a problem with that, perhaps due to ongoing custody battles, then it's up to them to send in notes asking that their children be interviewed or photographed. That makes it far easier than having schools try to keep track of a thousand permission slips.

What's most frustrating about this process is that schools usually seem to bring up the idea of permission slips with newspaper reporters who are looking to do "real stories." When a television camera is coming to school to cover a silly event, it doesn't seem like permission slips ever come up. The television cameras are welcomed with open arms.

However, I still fundamentally believe that if reporters build trust with principals, school systems and superintendents, many of the issues of access can be handled fairly. I have found that I established a track record for fair reporting and I can usually obtain whatever access I need. If I am having trouble getting into a school, I am usually able to offer them a reference or two from elsewhere in the school system. It's not the best solution in the world, but it seems to be working so far.

Of course, I understand that when a shooting occurs in a school, I'm usually not going to be allowed in. But when I want to spend time following a few kids around, I can usually find a way to make it happen.

Howard Libit—*Baltimore Sun*

A Reporter's Perspective

Gaining access to schools in a small town isn't as much of a problem as in larger communities. But without access and a first-hand perspective on a school issue, any reporter covering education doesn't have much of a story.

It's important to show and not just tell about what is going on in schools, and an on-site visit gives the media a chance to observe what is really happening in classrooms. We are the link between the people who don't have school-aged children and the institutions their tax dollars support.

But most school officials assume that a reporter's visit must mean trouble. An outsider wanting to do an in-depth story, even on something good, often sends up cautionary flags in their minds. It's as if they see the headlines slighting their school written before you finish. So, rather than opening their doors, they put up barriers—to protect themselves and their students, they say.

I've heard that when reporters pursue the issue of access to a superintendent or a principal, the reception is sometimes more welcome. I've noticed that the higher up the chain of command I go to gain access, the less resistance I've encountered. They are more accustomed to dealing with media and don't seem to be as timid about our presence in schools. It is no coincidence these are also the people that I talk to the most and who know me best.

The easiest way to bridge the gap of access problems is to build relationships with the people on your beat. Establishing a reputation of always being fair and accurate doesn't happen overnight, but it does happen if that's what you value. Acknowledging my mistakes and listening to feeback are another two small steps that I can take.

Becky Waldrop—*Corvallis* (Oregon) *Gazette-Times*

story that was done on overcrowding. I sat down and I talked with the people in the district. I said, "Look, you know we have to open the door and let people take a look at this."

They (reporters) have access to parents. We don't control parents. If a reporter wants to talk to a parent, they can talk to a parent. If a parent chooses to let their child talk to the reporter about what's going on in their school, then the child can talk to the reporter. There are a number of ways (to get the story).

I found with parents that if they really want to talk to reporters, they'll talk to reporters. If there are people in the community that want to talk to you, they'll talk to you. More and more, the schools are very interested in getting out certain messages—just building awareness for the community so that they know of why certain things exist in the school system. So, I think you're going to see more of an openness and a willingness, as long as there is balance there.

We don't always have to be the facilitator for the reporter. I used to joke around, and say that I got tired of doing some of the younger reporters' work for them. I mean that's kind of what it boils down to. You (the reporters) are on a time line; you want easy access; and you want certain things to happen almost instantly. That's not our role. Our role is to help you and to be a facilitator, but not get everything all in order in a nice package for you so that you can step into the box and pull the story together.

Q? Ted Kesler, how much did it change when the reporter who was in your classroom was joined by a photographer from the newspaper?

Kesler: It changed somewhat. She ended up following me around. I had to tell her not to follow me into the bathroom at one point. It's like Judith said, the more the children see someone around them, the more comfortable they are with that person. They act most unnatural when it's a one-shot deal. And they act most authentic when you establish a relationship with them (the children), which only can occur over time.

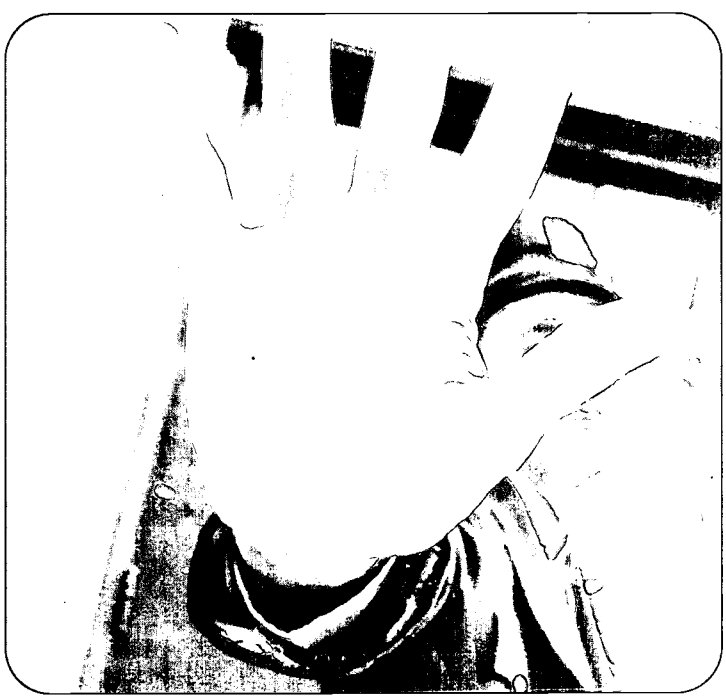
I personally welcome visitors to my classroom. I say, "Why don't you come in and take a look at what's happening in my room?" We just completed an open school week, and I had plenty of visitors in my room. The one thing is, though, we gave the visitors something like a directed view of what to look for. So it was kind of directed viewing.

Q? Judith Conk, you presided over what would probably be called a superintendent's nightmare. For people who don't know, Glen Ridge, New Jersey, was where four athletes sexually attacked a retarded female student. A television docu-drama was aired, a book was written about the incident, and reams and reams of newspaper columns were turned out about it. How do you comment on the media's performance during that incident?

Conk: Well, I was not present when the actual incident occurred so I have had to deal with the cultural mythology. My first year in Glen Ridge was the year that the book came out. I had been a superintendent somewhere else when the incident occurred. Once it happened, we all followed the reports and talked to our colleagues. I never realized when I got into the town that it would become my issue.

I started in December and the first graduation date someone said to me, "Oh, by the way, 'The Book'"—that's how they refer to it in Glen Ridge, "The Book"—"is being published today." And I said, "Gee, I want to get a copy of it because I want to read it to make sure I know what's being said."

Five minutes later, I got a phone call from the high school principal that CNN was at the school. Now, this is graduation day. And I think that my frustration all along has been the reporters' need to involve the kids who are many generations removed from the situation, in order to get their opinion on it. For example, that CNN reporter wanted to go to the graduation to interview students who were graduating that night. Now, those kids were in fourth grade when the incident occurred. Most people (who were involved in the incident) had moved out of town. And I kept saying (to the media), "What's the motivation? I mean, what are they going to tell you? Why disrupt their graduation?"



Subsequently, we've paid a lot of attention to our athletic teams. I can't comment really on what the district was like then, but I can tell you that we learned a heck of a lot since then. We have put in programs and things like athlete-scholars, and we've built up other ways for students to achieve and be recognized and valued. Yet, it always gets back to that incident.

So, when the docu-drama was coming out, at least I was forewarned, and I was able to put together a press kit. And I watched the movie that night, and I was just horrified by the poor acting, and certainly by the way it was portrayed. But, again, they wanted to interview kids, and these kids were in first grade when the incident occurred. Finally, I said to them, "I can't give you access to our kids. But you're in the town and they are all over the town. Kids are going to be on the playing fields; they're going to be walking to the one store we have in Glen Ridge. I can't prevent you from talking to them."

The tough thing is when an incident keeps coming up. That's a very hard thing for a town, whether they handled it right or wrong the first time around. We've come eons away from that incident, in terms of the way we deal with kids, the way we value everyone in the system, and not just the athletes. But it's always going to be there.

Q? Roger, maybe you could comment on what it's like to be a public affairs person for a school district that's under state takeover and the implications for access.

Jones: When you hear "state takeover," everyone thinks there's this big ominous hand of the state that's hovering over a district. Really, the state is not involved to the extent that most people think. The superintendent gets to manage the schools. But once the city is removed from the process, there is frustration, There are some concerns that they no longer have a role in the process. I was never instructed to make it difficult for the media. I don't think that the intent ever was to really deny the media access. I think it was: How do you respond to all the issues and all the questions that the media is asking surrounding the state takeover?

Q? Ted, could you talk briefly about what it feels like to be put under the microscope by a reporter and to know that your movements are going to be in the *New York Times*?

Kesler: It actually made me a much better teacher. It changed me in the sense that our classrooms do have to be more open to the public. It forced me to put into practice everything that I said. It forced me to be much more consistent about what I said and about what I actually did with the kids. Because I knew that Jack was there, I got to the point where I felt like my voice was being broadcast on the school P.A. system from the time I arrived to the end of the day. Now, I pretty much try to teach that way. If anybody walked into my class at any given moment, I'd be okay with whatever they saw.

Access to public schools may also pose special problems. Generally, public school property is treated as non-public-forum public property, and regulations that restrict access but are designed to lessen interference with normal school activities would be constitutionally permissible. No state laws bar the media from school grounds outright, but individual school districts may have adopted regulations limiting access to school property.

In June 1996 the California Attorney General's office issued an advisory opinion giving school administrators the authority to deny media access to school grounds. Ruling that "the constitutional right to gather information is not without limit," the Attorney General authorized exclusion of the media if their presence "would interfere with peaceful conduct of the activities of the school." (A.G. Op. No. 95-509)

The opinion was unusual, considering that California law specifically exempts the news media from the definition of "outsiders" who must check with administrators before visiting schools. (Calif. Penal Code §§ 627.1, .2; Calif. Evidence Code § 5551070)

Even if access to school grounds is permitted, reporting activities may still be limited. For example, when a congressional candidate spoke at a high school in Auburn, N.Y., the school's principal allowed reporters to cover the candidate's speech but prohibited them from photographing or interviewing individual students.

Restrictions may also extend to activities that take place outside school grounds. When a reporter attempted to interview students after a high school graduation ceremony that took place in the Forum building in Harrisburg, Pa., police arrested him for refusing to leave the building. Though the police later claimed that school officials had told them to bar the press from the event, charges against the reporter were dropped.

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Fred M. Hechinger

The Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media operates on four levels—helping journalists who write about education do a better job, helping editors and supervisors of education coverage deal with the challenges of overseeing the education beat, helping journalists and educators better understand their respective roles, and assisting the general public in its understanding of the issues involved in education coverage through publications and public events. The Institute carries out its mandate primarily through seminars, mostly for journalists. Presenters include educators from throughout the country, including members of the faculty of Teachers College, Columbia University.

Journalists who participate in the seminars compete for the fellowships that are awarded to all of those who are accepted. The fellowships—usually about 30 per seminar—provide for hotel accommodations, meals, a travel allowance, and free tuition. Most seminars are in New York City, but some are held at other locales around the country. A brochure listing all of its seminars is available from the Hechinger Institute. Information and an application may also be obtained from Hechinger's web page: **www.teacherscollege.edu/hechinger**

The work of the Institute is supported by foundations. The two major sources of funds have been the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, but many other funders have also contributed to the Institute.

The Institute is named in memory of Fred M. Hechinger, who was an education editor of the *New York Times* and a trustee of Teachers College. The idea for the Institute arose from conversations between Fred Hechinger and Arthur Levine, the president of Teachers College. Gene I. Maeroff, a former national education correspondent of the *New York Times* and the author of several books, was the founding director of the Institute in 1996 and continues in that position.

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Additional copies of this report may be obtained from the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at the cost of $5 per copy.

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